

RENATA CZEKALSKA
Uniwersytet Jagielloński w Krakowie
e-mail: r.czekalska@uj.edu.pl

Reading into the Magic of Words A Sample Interpretation of *Uṣā* by Shamsheer Bahadur Singh

Abstract

Modern Hindi poetry is often described as an outcome of Indian tradition and Western influences. The aim of the article is to propose a possible answer to a general question of how the works of cotemporary Hindi poetry should/could be read and analyzed. The proposition is supported with a sample analysis of the poem *Uṣā* by Shamsheer Bahadur Singh.

Keywords: literary studies, contemporary Indian poetry, 20th-century Hindi poetry, Shamsheer Bahadur Singh.

The discussion whether modern Indian poetry can be read through a “western eye” or, in other words, interpreted with the tools of western literary studies, seems purely academic and therefore insignificant from the point of view of the artistic merit of any literary work. However, since it keeps reoccurring, and especially outside India, perhaps it would make sense to add yet another argument against it. Being deeply convinced that any classification of literary achievements which is based on political geography of the modern world excludes the possibility of reading (and assessing) literature, first and foremost, as art (the art of word), I believe that the term “Indian” (or for that matter also “European”, “South American”, “North American”, “African”, etc.) is just an empty label. Therefore, if we agree with the humanist conviction that the best literature is universal¹, the tools for analysing literature should not be “local” and cannot be limited by geographical criteria.

¹ The view I present here is of course directly opposite to some theorists, such as Marxists, New Historicists, and Cultural Materialists, who would argue that literature is firmly rooted in the time and place of its making. In my opinion, works of literature can be (and not must be) rooted in their own culture or/end time, but their literary value is constituted by the inherent universality of the themes which determine their content.

In the article—divided into three parts: ‘The Poet’, ‘The Poem’ and ‘The Point’—I argue for reading contemporary Indian poetry most of all as “poetry”, and not primarily as “Indian”. Therefore, my argument is against the idea of the necessity to read and interpret works written by contemporary Indian writers only in the context of the culture in which they were created, and exclusively through the theoretical tools which belong to the Indian tradition of literary theory. It is a proposition of an approach which does not, in any case, exclude the local nuances and references,² but which allows for a reading unbiased by geographical or, even more so, civilisational designations.³ Therefore, it is also an approach which opposes any instrumental treatment of literary (or, in the broader sense, cultural) values, following in some way also the syncretic treatment which the Indian literary critics apply to literature written in modern India. To support my argument, as the main part of the article I propose a sample interpretation of a single poem which might be treated as an illustration of a possible way of reading/interpreting contemporary Indian poetry.⁴

1. The Poet

The author of the the chosen poem, Shamsheer Bahadur Singh (1911–1993), was a poet, critic, surrealist painter and translator. He authored nine books, including seven poetry collections and two volumes of criticism. For the poetry collection *Cuka bhī hūm main nahīm!* (“I am not yet finished”) he received the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award (1977). He is recognized as one of the most original Hindi poets of the 20th century, as the poet who introduced innovative means of expression into Hindi poetry, bringing it to a truly modern, exploratory level. He wrote in Hindi and Urdu, and his exceptional artistic sensitivity often makes his poetry outstandingly brilliant.

Singh had practiced multiple lyrical forms – sonnets, songs, rubaiyats, ghazals, free verse compositions. The themes of his poems are miscellaneous. He discussed every-day issues, bestowing on them the quality of extraordinariness, wrote about politics and about other artists (such as Pablo Neruda, Vincent van

² For as U.R. Anantha Murthy rightly pointed out, “How [...] can reality become metaphor, and thus become more real than what it was at the level of appearance? [...] A writer can only see everything from within and make the concrete experience glow into significance, that is, if he is lucky.”, in: U.R. Anantha Murthy, *Being a Writer in India* [in:] *Tender Ironies. A Tribute to Lothar Lütze*; ed. D. Chitre, G.-D. Sontheimer, H. Brückner, A. Feldhaus, R. Kimmig, 2nd, revised Internet Edition, Tübingen – Würzburg 2003, p. 130 and 131.

³ I argued against the idea of enforcing the most unclear and undefined category of “Indian-ness” on contemporary Indian literature in the article *Tożsamość tekstu w przestrzeni komunikacji międzykulturowej* [Text identity in the space of intercultural communication], “Współczesna przestrzeń tożsamości. Politeja – Jagiellonian Cultural Studies” 2012, nr 20(2), ed. by S. Jaskuła and L. Korporewicz, p. 211–228.

⁴ The number of scholarly books, articles and studies dedicated to analysing contemporary poetry and the limits of interpretation produced by Western academia is simply overwhelming. However, the Indian scholars studying contemporary literature have not yet created an approach independent from the methods invented in the West which would exclusively fit contemporary Indian poetry.

Gogh, Pablo Picasso or Johann Sebastian Bach). However, love and nature remain the two most explored subjects which brought the artist to the highest levels of artistic excellence. Singh's love poems are some of the most subtle among contemporary Hindi verse, for the very essence of their beauty seems to remain in the silences between words.⁵ The silences which cannot be defined, yet which usually are the typical components of pictorial compositions. Therefore, reading Shamsheer Bahadur Singh as a poet would be difficult without referring to him as a painter, though his works can but rarely be seen by the public.⁶

2. The Poem

Pure artistic attractiveness, based mainly on the graphic vision, gave rise to my interest in the poem *Uṣā* (Dawn):

Prāt nabh yā bahut nīlā śamkh jaise
 Bhor kā nabh
 Rākh se līpā huā caukā
 (abhī gīlā paṛā hai)
 Bahut kālī sil zarā-se lāl kesar se
 Ki jaise dhul gayī ho
 Slet par yā lāl khriyā cāk
 Mal dī ho kisī ne
 Nīl jal meṁ yā kisī kī
 Gaur jhilmil deh
 Jaise hil rahi ho.
 Aur...
 Jādū tūttā hai is uṣā kā ab
 Sūryoday ho rahā hai.⁷

The poem contains a set of statements (both general and detailed) which at first glance seem plain and ordinary. However, upon further reflection, the reader may get the impression that this is not only a literary work, not just a very graphic picture, but a direct representation of a statement made by the poet himself that “the impersonation of beauty constantly remains in front of our eyes”.⁸ It is, there-

⁵ More about the poetry of Shamsheer Bahadur Singh, see: R. Czekalska, *Rodowody nowoczesnej poezji hindi. Od chajawadu do nai kawita*, Kraków 2009, p. 119–129; L. Rosenstein, *New Poetry in Hindi (Nayī Kavītā): An Anthology*, Delhi 2002, p. 43–52; N. Simh, *Śamśer kī śamśeriyat* [in:] Śamśer Bahadur Simh, *Pratinidhi kavitaēm*, Naī Dillī 1998, p. 5–9.

⁶ Ranjana Argade, the artist's life companion, donated his entire collection to the International Hindi University in Wardha, where it currently remains.

⁷ **Dawn**// Early morning sky – like a deep blue conch shell// sky at daybreak// Kitchen floor cleaned with ashes/ (still wet)// a pitch black stone/ as if washed with red saffron// or a streak of red chalk/ crushed on a slate// or a fair glistening body/ swaying in the blue waters// and.../ The spell of this dawn breaks/ Sunrise is coming. (Translated from Hindi by Lucy Rosenstein [translation published in: L. Rosenstein, op. cit., p. 47]. The original version of the poem quoted from the selection: Śamśer Bahadur Simh, *Tūṭī huī bikhrī huī*, ed. A. Vājpeyī, New Delhi 1997, p. 13.

⁸ *Sundartā kā avatār hamāre sāmne pal-chin honā rahtā hai*; see: Ś.B. Simh, *Vaktavy* [in:] *Dūsra saptak*, ed. Ajñeya, New Delhi 1996, p. 87.

fore, a poem which relates to the most basic human experience, to observing the phenomena of nature, and in this particular case, to an occurrence on the borderline between the earth and the sky – to the exact moment of sunrise. This natural phenomenon evokes most probably an uncountable amount of associations, hence the way of reading into this poem proposed here can only be treated as one of many possibilities.

Let us begin with the moment of sunrise as a sensual experience, most closely related to the so-called metaphysical emotions felt by human beings, which are evoked only by the sight of the rising sun. This moment – in literature (especially poetry) and the visual arts – has been depicted and interpreted numerous times, in perhaps all the cultures of the world, and in many different ways. It is, therefore, not easy to portray the rising sun by means of poetic expression in a manner both innovative and also artistically gratifying, since the novelty in itself does not constitute artistic value.⁹ However, an attentive reader may get the impression that even though he or she is participating in a common experience, it has been depicted here as a unique event, fascinating in detail and, all in all, simply magical. This way of expression creates a feeling that we see the dawn through the eyes of the author, in an extraordinary experience shared between the author and the reader.

On the level of facts, the existential space of this experience is set most clearly: it is the “[e]arly morning sky” or, in other words, “the spell of this dawn”. The space of artistic interpretation of the phenomenon of dawn can be found between the opening statement and point of the poem. In this space the poet organizes the given information by using two different registers of language: the discursive and the metaphorical. However, the two registers are not strictly kept apart, even within a singular sentence. For example, the second verse: “sky at daybreak” – because of the use of the preposition ‘at’ seems static, motionless, stuck at a certain point in time. And yet, if the reader moves from the level of grammar to the level of imagination, it would be possible for her or him to instantly see the dynamics of the sky at daybreak. And it is of course not grammar but imagination that the poem is constructed on.

The first line is also an example of the two different registers fitting perfectly logically into one entity of a verse: “Early morning sky – like a deep blue conch shell”. The lyrical situation seems to be defined very precisely: early morning, at daybreak and, quite surprisingly, there appears “a deep blue conch”. The picture would be universal and rather realistic without the conch, because the conch takes us away from “here” and “now” into the past. It carries within itself the echo of the sound of the sea – its former environment that is now lost. What is truly stunning, however, is the image constructed by adding the colour “deep blue” (deep blue sky...? deep blue sea...?) that turns the whole image into a possibly unique metaphor. Water, the sea – possibly a reference to the origins of life, associated with the beginning of each new day – constitutes a metaphorical prefiguration of

⁹ Here it is perhaps worth remembering the bitter experience of a great number of poets around the world who believed that the idea of the avant-garde is basically taking novelty as a value in itself.

existence, and it is on this background that the graphic components of the text gain proper value.

And what happens further on in the poem? The third and the fourth lines create a highly realistic image, which could just as easily have been painted by Van Gogh with thick layers of oil paint: “Kitchen floor cleaned with ashes/ (still wet)”. The graphic substance is enhanced by the nouns “floor” and “ashes” and the state (“wet”) they are in at this very moment. The floor is not defined by any adjective. It is only “cleaned with ashes” in a description vivid to the point that one can almost hear “brushing”, “polishing” or “washing”.

But at the same time the ashes bring associations with fire, with destruction, with nonexistence, and, consequently, with their various ritual functions.

The floor resembles the foundations of a house, or maybe a flat. The adverb “still” announces that the process of scrubbing the floor with ashes took place not long ago, hence the floor shines with moisture – or perhaps it is simply wet. The author does not say whether this moisture could be felt or can only be seen. The sensuous image simply is there – it exists in the poem. That is all. And there is no human presence there.

However, the next two verses seem as a true interpretational riddle: “a pitch black stone/ as if washed with red saffron”. Which of the previously mentioned objects do these words refer to? To the floor? To the deep blue (maybe in places still pitch black) sky illuminated at this moment with the first saffron rays of sunlight? Perhaps this fragment is key for the interpretation of this poem. And it does not seem beyond the limits of association to link the image of the black stone (shiny perhaps, since it is washed) to the ritual bathing of stone idols with water or milk or clarified butter and adorning them with saffron powder, flowers the colour of saffron or with turmeric paste – the rituals that take place also at day break, when the idol awakes and needs to be prepared for the day.

So, most probably, this image is related to reality that exists beyond the floor, outside the house: the black stone, the deep blue sky, the orange-red saffron – they are all interconnected entities. They could all be seen as parts of the daybreak sky. The graphic beauty of this image merits a moment’s reflection: the black stone washed with red saffron – there is some cold disharmony in it that feels distant, non-humane.

These associations lead us to the second part of the poem. But before I move forward, I cannot stop myself from stating the obvious – the reader of this poem must become not only the one who sees, who perceives the whole situation, but also the one who speaks. Since there is no other lyrical subject, the one who sees and describes remains outside the text. Therefore, in the process of reading, it may be so that the reader becomes the observer, who in the second part of the poem sees just a few single instances, connected only by conjunctions: “or a streak of red chalk/ crushed on a slate”. The first reference to the traces of red chalk on a slate (perhaps a black slate which would be a rather natural thing), is again an allusion to the same colour combination – red fire and black ashes perhaps. Therefore, it becomes not only pure aesthetics, but a set of existential metaphors expressed through colour.

The second reference is even more vague, more intriguing: “or a fair glistening body/ swaying in the blue waters”. Is this an image of a ritual? Perhaps a metaphor of human life? The blue waters are perhaps the sky? The same sky on which at this very moment we see the sunrise, or the dawn? And if it were the dawn, then the dawn of what? Maybe of consciousness? These are only a few suggestions, yet the possibilities of reading into these lines seem limitless.

The last conjunction implies the sensuality of the text: “and.../ The spell of this dawn breaks/ Sunrise is coming”. “The spell” in the sense of magic of words or “the spell” of the moment? The magic of art or the magic of nature?

Let us remember that we do not know who in the poem cleaned the floor with ashes and why. We know, it was done before dawn (maybe a moment ago), since we perceive the floor as “still wet”. The poet depicts only the visual side of the moment of sunrise, yet without the presence of man. Only the man-made material objects – the floor, the slate, the chalk – can be described as belonging to the realm of mankind. The conch, the stone and the water are the natural components of the outside world. Between man, who is not physically present in the poem, and the outside world some magic seems to take place, some visions of human perception seem to happen. The outside world does not need man, it exists for itself and by itself, without even being aware of us. So what does it mean that “the spell of this dawn breaks”? The mysterious combinations of hues and colours disappear and only the everyday reality remains. That is all.

The author did not give himself a place in the poem, but he allowed its readers to enter it. Every one of us can be the one who sees, who washes the floor before the new day (new life?) begins, the one who observes the connection between the world of nature, the sun and the man. Each of us can experience our own range of associations and can refer to our own cultural background. Each of us can read it in our own ecstasy or in our own sorrow.¹⁰

3. The Point

And now the time comes to return to the issue indicated in the opening part of this article: how should one read and analyse modern Hindi poetry? Poetry which, generally speaking, is a distinctive result of Indian tradition (depicted usually in the content) and Western influences (especially visible in the form).

The above analysis may be considered proof enough that poetry (or as the case may be any work of art!) merits close reading if it can be artistically enticing. Whether it is read with references to the culture of its origin or on the universal level – it still remains a fascinating work of art. The analyzed poem appears to be completely “western” in its form. Moreover, its content is universal enough to be read outside the Indian tradition even though it contains images and references

¹⁰ A proposition of an analysis of the poem has been published in: R. Czekalska, *Rodowody...*, p. 129–132.

not to be experienced anywhere else in the world.¹¹ Every reading of the text – whether with the tools invented by Western scholars of literature or those typical for Indian literary studies – can therefore extend the scope of associations depending on the cultural background as well as the general knowledge of the reader.

Since the very beginnings of modern Indian literary studies, that is more or less from the fourth decade of the 20th century, Indian literary critics and theoreticians have been using such “western” terms as “metaphor”, “simile”, “allegory”, “ellipsis”, etc. Moreover, quite often in the books of criticism printed in the Indian scripts one sees these words standing out from the text for they are written in Latin alphabets. This of course might be for the reason that the professional, technical terminology, which accompanied the works of western authors in the form of critical publications, influenced several generations of Indian artists and intellectuals at least as much as the pieces of literature they discussed.

As a result, the author of our sample poem is described by Indian critics in “western” terms – most often as a surrealist painter and an impressionist poet. Neither of the terms could be considered “Indian” and yet the artist is also characterized as an outstanding (or at least eminent) Indian poet, belonging to the Hindi-Urdu literary tradition. And, similarly, the analyzed poem: though originally written in Hindi (and so, like the poet, Indian by birth) nevertheless appears to be impressionistic in the first part and surrealist in the second, after which there comes the point of the poem (yet another western invention), which is there to break the magic spell of the aesthetic experience (justified by the tradition of *rasa*) and bring us back to reality.

If one admitted the dual nature of the possible interpretation of the poem (as well as of the artistic character of the poet) would that make the analysed work any less “Indian”, any less important for Indian literature? Would it take away some of its artistic merit? I believe not. And I truly hope that in this sample analysis – at least to some extent – I was able to show that the approach to modern literature cannot be subject to geography. Just as the literary works are not. For if a reader, or even a scholar of literature, is able to enjoy the pleasures of coming into contact with literature of a high artistic level, no geographical denominations can spoil the aesthetic satisfaction experienced in the act of (an unbiased) perception of a work of art.

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¹¹ For example the images of “a pitch black stone/ as if washed with red saffron”, mentioned in the analysis and the fact that the poem is not titled *bhor* (which is a more common word for “dawn” in Hindi, used in the second line of the poem) but *uṣā* which evokes more direct references to classical Indian culture.

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